

Abstract

This paper presents the major stages of the development of the modern Greek national identity from the Age of Enlightenment, through the formation of the nation state, to the consolidation of the official state ideology in the last third of the 19th century. It investigates the emergence of the modern Greek nation in the context of the Southeastern European modernization, and it aims at examining the social and political background of nationalist movements. Furthermore, it attempts to answer the question of whether it is nationalism that creates the nation state in the Greek territories, or vice versa, it is the nation state that creates nationalism.

The principal aim of the paper is to illustrate the establishment of the modern Greek national identity. Its development, based on an analysis of contemporary literary and political texts, can be summarized the following way:

Before the Age of Enlightenment we cannot talk about the existence of neither a Greek nation, nor a Greek national identity; even during the Ottoman rule the Byzantine, “Roman” identity was prevalent, which was determined on religious grounds. The Greek-speaking merchant bourgeoisie, which emerged at the end of the 18th century, came into contact with the ideas of the Enlightenment through its mercantile activities with Western Europe, and became its conveyor in the Ottoman Empire. During this period, a “Hellenic” identity emerged beside the traditional “Roman” one, which emphasized the direct lineage from the ancient Greeks. Both of these were present in the Greek identity despite having various ambivalences in many respects. The coexistence of these two conflicting identities characterized the first era of the modern Greek nation state established through a successful war of independence. The chief aim of the official state ideology was to reconcile this discrepancy and to remedy the situation caused by the fact that two-thirds of the Greek-speaking population were left outside the state borders. After trying to find an ideology in the 1830s, the Great Idea (*Megáli Idéa*), the exceptionally successful state ideology, was formulated in the middle of the 1840s, which was able to integrate the Byzantine-Roman, as well as the ancient-Hellenic identity. Furthermore, it created the grounds for the modern Greek identity and was able to lay the foundation for the state’s ambitions for expansion.